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Black Loyalist Archaeology at Birchtown, Nova Scotia

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The Nova Scotia Museum's "Black Loyalists, Black Communities" project is a two-year undertaking attempting to redress the lack of balance in the study of Afro-Nova Scotians using historical and archaeological research. The year long archaeology project was designed to study sites in Tracadie, Guysborough County and Birchtown, Shelburne County. The subject of this article is the archaeology of Birchtown, specifically the site known as AkDi-23.

The 1998 archaeology project examined the remains of what is believed to have been the house of Colonel Stephen Blucke, the man who led the Black Loyalists to Birchtown. The testing and excavation revealed the cellar of a relatively substantial building which appears to have been abandoned at the end of the 18th century. The artifacts recovered were exceptional, both in quantity and quality, for what we know of the Black Loyalist period in Birchtown. They speak of an attempted middle-class existence surrounded by extreme poverty, a scene of contrast within a community we are beginning to see as much more vivid and varied than has previously been acknowledged.

For the purposes of this report, Black Loyalist refers to all African-Americans who emigrated to Nova Scotia in the wake of the American Revolution. This includes the free, the freed, the indentured, as well as the many slaves White Loyalists continued to possess.

Birchtown, Nova Scotia, was founded by Black Loyalists in 1783 and was, at the time, the largest and most significant settlement of free Blacks in North America. Although its population grew rapidly, reaching a peak of 1,531 people in 1784, Birchtown did not thrive. The discrimination and inequity the Black Loyalists had hoped to escape followed them to Nova Scotia. A race riot in 1784 and famine in 1789, combined with the poor quality of the soil, led half of Birchtown's population to join the exodus for Sierra Leone in 1791. That event essentially heralded the end of Black Loyalist Birchtown.

The archaeological study of Birchtown, specifically the evidence of the Black Loyalists, began in 1993 when the locally-based Black Loyalist Heritage Society sponsored an archaeological survey (Niven 1994). There have been minor archaeological projects in Birchtown every year since 1994. The archaeological evidence to date tells us that the Black Loyalists lived in shelters ranging from semi-subterranean emergency shelters to more conventional cellared houses. A number of very unusual stone mounds (22 in all) were also identified and mapped in 1995. The mounds are all well-made and were spaced quite closely together. The partial excavation of one mound in 1998 did not reveal any insights into its age or function.

The main subject of the 1998 Birchtown archaeology project was the suspected home of Colonel Stephen Blucke, the leader of the Black Loyalists in Birchtown, which historical evidence suggested was located on the property of Thelma Acker, very close to the shore. A series of shovel tests confirmed a late-18th century occupation and also revealed what was thought to be a rock-filled midden.

We knew very little about Colonel Stephen Blucke, let alone about the house he lived in. He was

originally from Barbados, lived in Birchtown with his wife, mother, and an indentured servant, was a very well-educated man, and was a veteran of the American Revolution. Blucke disappears from the historic record in 1796-1797 and his subsequent fate remains a mystery.

[Figure omitted from online version]. Caption: Excavations underway at AkDi-23. Rock-filled cellar feature is visible in the center. Birchtown Bay lies in the distance.

He was also a man of some means and his house seems to have been quite different from the neighbours who are almost invariably described as living in 'huts' and "very poorly Lodged indeed". The one partial description of the house we have is from William Booth in 1789: "He began by Building a spacious house(but the Building he has been obliged to stop the progress of; having only, as far as I could see, completed his Kitchen, with a small room(" (Booth, 1789: 53; Jeffery, 1907: 57).

The excavations on AkDi-23 totaled 100 square meters and, although architectural information was minimal, did reveal a large cellar that had been filled at the end of the eighteenth century. The cellar hole partly uncovered at AkDi-23 measured approximately 1.49 meters (4.89 feet) from west to east, and 2.69 meters (8.82 feet) from north to south. The area is approximately 4.10 meters square (45 square feet). When it was first dug, the cellar probably measured nine or 10 feet by five feet. It was dug to a depth of one meter and cut into the sub-soil with vertical walls at least on the west, north, and south sides.

Over 13,000 artifacts were recovered during the 1998 archaeology project, 12,449 from the excavation. Almost half of the artifacts were found within the rock fill of the cellar (Lot 12). There was a minimum of 114 ceramic vessels identified, 93 of them from within Lot 12. Over half of those vessels were made of pearlware (45 or 62.50%) followed closely by creamware (17 or 23.61%). Six vessels were coarse earthenware (8.33%), two were porcelain (2.78%), and two stoneware. The mean ceramic date of the vessels is 1796.59, which conforms very well to what is known about Blucke's disappearance from the historic record.

Other artifacts of significance were many military items: a fragment of a triangular bayonet; a sling swivel; a spur; a British naval boarding axe; and, two white metal buttons of the Second American Regiment (Irish Volunteers), a Loyalist regiment operating out of New York from 1780 to 1782.

The archaeological evidence from AkDi-23 is compelling and, at the very least, suggests that one Black Loyalist, who most likely did not join the rush to Sierra Leone, had quite a different lifestyle compared to his neighbours. The most satisfying accomplishment of the project was the combining of historical and archaeological research, the discovery of new documents and sites, to illuminate a settlement which was much richer and more vibrant than traditional history would lead us to believe.

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[Figure omitted from online version.] Caption: The Rock-filled cellar feature at AkDi-23,
partially excavated.